

Message Text

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SUBJECT: PARTIES SPLIT ON NEGOTIATING WITH GOP

REF: (A) PANAMA 4897, (B) PANAMA 5130

SUMMARY: THE LIBERAL PARTY DECIDES TO PARTICIPATE IN THE GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSED "HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION" FOR POLITICAL REFORM. OTHER PARTIES, INCLUDING THE LARGE PANAMENISTA PARTY, ARE MORE RELUCTANT TO JOIN IN. WHETHER THEY DO OR DO NOT, THE COMMISSION WILL BE FACED WITH A DIFFICULT TASK IN ITS INTENDED GOAL OF NEGOTIATING, AMONG ANTAGONISTIC ELEMENTS, THE LEGALIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES. END SUMMARY.

1. PANAMA'S LIBERAL PARTY HAS DECIDED TO TAKE THE GOVERNMENT UP ON ITS OFFER TO NEGOTIATE THE LEGALIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES THROUGH THE "HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION" ANNOUNCED BY GENERAL TORRIJOS TWO WEEKS AGO. ACCORDING TO A JULY 18 TELEVISED STATEMENT BY PARTY PRESIDENT DAVID SAMUDIO, THE LIBERALS SEE THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE COMMISSION, WHICH IS TO STUDY AND MAKE RECOMMENDA-
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TIONS ON POLITICAL REFORM, AS AN OBLIGATORY PART OF THE "STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY." SAMUDIO EMPHASIZED THAT THE LIBERAL PARTY IS OPPOSED TO THE CURRENT SYSTEM AND IS NOT ALLIED WITH THE GOVERNMENT IN ANY "DEAL". HOWEVER, HE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT, AT THE NEGOTIATING TABLE, BOTH THE SUCCESSES AND THE FAILURES OF THE "REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS" WILL BE ANALYZED.

2. THE OTHER PARTIES, INCLUDING THE LARGE PANAMENISTA PARTY HEADED BY FORMER PRESIDENT ARNULFO ARIAS, APPEAR A LITTLE MORE RELUCTANT. ALTHOUGH THE PANAMENISTAS HAVE NOT YET ANNOUNCED A DECISION, THEY REPORTEDLY ARE NOT IMPRESSED WITH THE IDEA. TORRIJOS HAS MADE CLEAR THAT HIS "SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT" IS NOT AT ISSUE AND THAT NO THOUGHT IS BEING GIVEN TO ANY ELECTION WITH PARTY PARTICIPATION BEFORE 1984, WHEN THE TERM OF THE ADMINISTRATION TAKING OFFICE IN OCTOBER WILL EXPIRE. NOR ARE THE PANAMENISTAS ENAMORED OF HAVING TO NEGOTIATE WITH "LEFTIST" REPRESENTATIVES OF THE TORRIJOS REGIME (GOVERNMENT ADVISER ROMULO ESCOBAR AND EDUCATION MINISTER ROYO) WHOM THEY DO NOT TRUST.

3. THE SMALLER PARTIES, WHICH IN COMBINATION WITH THE PANAMENISTA PARTY MAKE UP A UNITED OPPOSITION FRONT (MINUS THE LIBERALS), LIKEWISE ARE HESITANT TO SIT DOWN AT THE NEGOTIATING TABLE WITH THE GOVERNMENT. THE REPUBLICAN PARTY HAS DECLARED THAT ITS PARTICIPATION IN THE HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION WILL DEPEND ON WHETHER THE GOVERNMENT APPEARS COMMITTED TO A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN THE SYSTEM OR WHETHER IT IS JUST LOOKING FOR A WAY TO MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO. IN A TELEVISIED POLITICAL DISCUSSION SHORTLY AFTER TORRIJOS ANNOUNCED HIS PLANS FOR THE COMMISSION, A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SOCIAL LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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DEMOCRATS SAID THAT, IN PRINCIPLE, HIS PARTY WOULD NOT PARTICIPATE IN IT, DUE TO THE "DISMAL" EXPERIENCE THE COUNTRY HAS HAD IN TERMS OF A DIALOG WITH THE GOVERNMENT OVER THE LAST TEN YEARS. A SPOKESMAN FOR THE DEMOCRATIC INDEPENDENT MOVEMENT (THE POLITICAL PARTY INCARNATION OF THE MOVEMENT OF INDEPENDENT LAWYERS) SAID THAT THEIR PARTICIPATION WOULD DEPEND ON THE "CIRCUMSTANCES" OF THE DIALOG. FOR THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY, THE DETERMINING FACTOR WOULD BE THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL GUARD: "IF PRIOR TO THE HIGH-LEVEL MEETING THERE IS A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING WITH THE NATIONAL GUARD REGARDING THE ROLE IT IS GOING TO PLAY IN THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL LIFE, THE HIGH-LEVEL COMMITTEE OR OTHER MECHANISMS COULD BE A SOLUTION... NO ONE ELSE CAN SPEAK FOR IT (THE GUARD) ... IF THERE IS THIS PRIOR CLEAR AND PRECISE AGREEMENT, THEN MANY THINGS ARE POSSIBLE."

4. THE LIBERAL PARTY, EVER SINCE IT DECLARED ITS SUPPORT FOR THE PANAMA CANAL TREATIES LAST YEAR, HAS TAKEN A STAND SOMEWHAT APART FROM THE OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES VIS-A-VIS THE TORRIJOS GOVERNMENT, AND THIS

MAY AGAIN BE THE CASE IN TERMS OF NEGOTIATING POLITICAL REFORMS THROUGH THE HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION. IF THE PANAMENISTA PARTY DOES NOT PARTICIPATE, HOWEVER, THE COMMISSION PROBABLY WILL BE HARD PUT TO SHOW ANY OOMPH. AND IF THEY DO PARTICIPATE, EVEN UNDER THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES, SUCH A COMMISSION MADE UP OF SUCH ANTAGONISTIC ELEMENTS WOULD PROBABLY FIND IT DIFFICULT TO COME TO MEANINGFUL AGREEMENT. THE SMALL PARTIES HAVE A SPECIAL REASON TO RESIST NEGOTIATING WITH TORRIJOS' GOVERNMENT, SINCE TORRIJOS, ESCOBAR AND OTHERS HAVE FREQUENTLY SAID THAT A MULTI-PARTY SYSTEM WITH A MYRIAD OF "MINI-PARTIES" IS TO BE AVOIDED. JORDEN

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